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Learning and Teaching in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

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Think Tank: Cultural Diversity

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At a teaching professional development session many years ago, a presenter spoke on ways to manage relational difficulties at work and in the classroom. We were each given a pair of silly glasses to put on–big, brightly-colored, dress-up box glasses. As we put our silly glasses on, we were encouraged to "see things from a different perspective." The physical act of putting on new glasses (or lenses) made me aware that I had the power to change the way I was looking at a situation. Wearing the glasses made me laugh. Actually, we *all* laughed: teachers and managers alike. By putting on silly glasses we realized three things: that we could choose to view things from another perspective, that we shared the experience of encountering difficulties because of our different points of view, and that this could actually bring us together (if we could be brave and honest enough to laugh at ourselves a little).

As a teacher in a second language classroom, the ability to see things from a different perspective is important. Without being aware of the "cultural lenses" (DeCapua, 2018, p. 12) through which we view life, it can be easy to fall into the trap of viewing behavior that seems unusual or different to our own behavior as "wrong." This can include the ideas, decisions, and interpersonal skills of our students if their cultural backgrounds are different to ours. For example, arriving late to class can be a source of concern to a teacher from a monochronic (do one thing at a time) culture. For a student from a polychronic (multiple tasks going on at the same time) culture, "people and relationships [have priority] over time schedules" (DeCapua, 2018, p. 20). I wasn't aware of this difference until recently, but it just didn't make sense to me that an otherwise enthusiastic, eager-to-learn student was just out to aggravate his (Western, monochronic!) teacher by arriving late to class. So, these sorts of classroom incidents prompted me to find out more about cultural backgrounds and differences. I am

discovering that a deeper understanding of what culture means and how it shapes thinking, benefits learning and teaching in my classroom.

You may have come across the metaphor of an iceberg which has been used to describe culture (Newton, 2007; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2011). Above the surface, the visible aspects of culture are easy to identify: art, music, clothing, language, food (DeCapua, 2018, p. 18). These are the "Big C" cultural items, but it's the "little c" items (Bennett, 1998; DeCapua, 2018) which form the largest part of what makes up culture: the elements of culture hidden below the surface. These include things such as our beliefs and norms about communication, politeness, time, gender roles, personal space, authority, or group and individual roles (DeCapua, 2018). These are the areas which we can tease apart and make explicit in our classrooms with students from different cultural backgrounds, so that expectations and norms become clearer. Before I discuss some of my own experiences and practical examples of this, a little about *why* some of these elements are hidden and difficult to identify.

We are shaped by culture in ways that we often aren't aware of (Newton, 2007), and research shows that seeing things from a different cultural perspective is not always an easy task for our brains to handle (Liddell & Jobson, 2016; Liddell, 2018). Averaged brain responses from East Asian and Western participants in a recent study found that differences in visual perception, self-reflection, perception of gesture and other areas were related to cultural backgrounds (Han & Ma, 2015). However, this study also suggested that our brains are built to adapt to change. We learn culture because of the plasticity of our brains, but the structure and function of the brain can also change as it encounters new behaviors and cultures. The brain then begins to guide behavior to fit into the new cultural context and, the authors claim, we "never stop modifying existing cultures" (Han & Ma, 2015, p. 671). Brains, behavior, and culture may be connected in such a way that each of these influences the others in a "circular interaction during which culture, behavior, and the brain vary dynamically" (Han & Ma, 2015, p. 669).

One cultural difference which strongly influences behavior is that of collectivism and individualism, or how we identify ourselves with respect to others (DeCapua, 2018). In a collectivist culture, "the group or 'collective' is the centerpoint of one's identity" (DeCapua, 2018, p. 38). Dr Belinda Liddell, an Australian 2018 "Top 5 Science Communication Program"

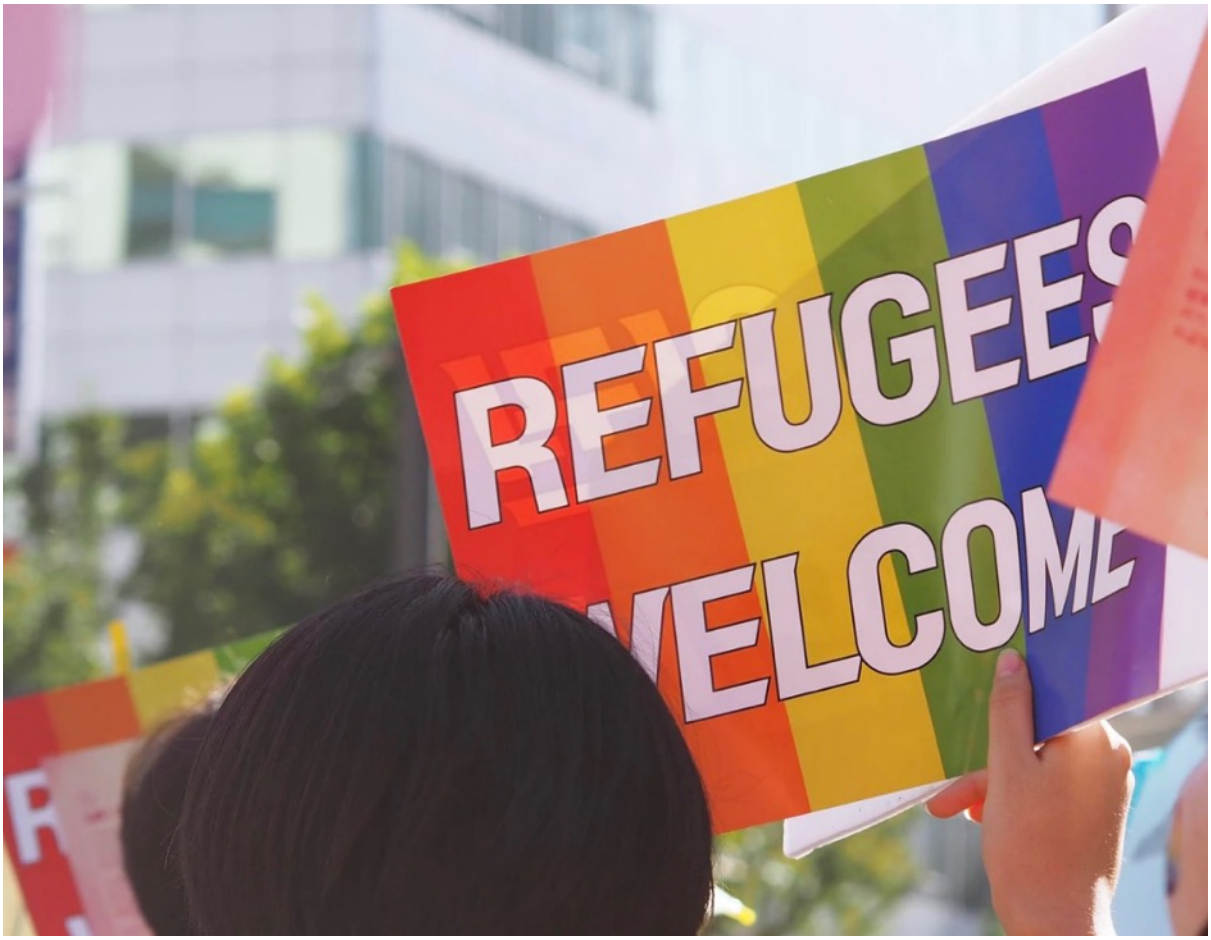
award winner, explains some of the psychological research in this area in one of the videos featured in our April issue. As a member of the "WEIRD" (Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democratic) group (Liddell, 2018), understanding collectivism has helped me to understand certain student behaviors.

For example, in a class of young refugee-background students I taught, the more advanced students regularly helped a classmate who was at a very beginning level of English by simply taking her pencil and doing tasks for her. At first, I was concerned: How was she going to learn anything if she didn't try? How could I assess her progress? And why were her friends doing everything for her anyway? After some more reflection and reading, it occurred to me that my individualist mindset was having trouble coming to terms with the collectivist actions of my students. To me, they were hindering an individual student's progress. To them, perhaps they were viewing class progress as a holistic effort, and by helping someone else they were helping the group as a whole. Rather than singling out or reprimanding the students (which would only have confused and upset them), I spent more time at the beginning of each lesson making expectations and plans clear to the whole class before we began an activity. We talked about the difference between a group activity and an individual activity, and how it was important for me to see what each person could do and where they needed assistance. We discussed English questions and "sentence starters" (DeCapua, 2018, p. 125) that students could use to ask me for help. We arranged desks differently for groupwork and individual tasks to make it visually clear that these were different styles of activities.

> ***We become teachers who embrace and model curiosity, openness, and a willingness to learn alongside the learner.***

Another cultural element that isn't always obvious is that of non-verbal communication (DeCapua, 2018; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2011). It can make a big difference for students who are learning the cultural norms in a new place. A class of refugee-background students I was teaching recently were discussing how nervous they felt when going for job interviews in Australia. One of the students, a lady from South Sudan who had lived in Australia for many years, asked me a question that I (with my "WEIRD" background!) thought was unusual: "My daughter has told me that when I go to a job interview, I should look at the interviewer and smile. Should I really do this, teacher?" I explained that in Australian culture, it's considered appropriate to look at the person you're speaking to. Eye contact and smiling are ways of showing that you are interested, open, and honest. The student was surprised, as were other women in the group from South Sudan. They explained to me that in South Sudan, it was considered highly disrespectful to make eye contact with someone in authority, *especially* if you were a woman looking at a man. Having these discussions in the language classroom can make implicit cultural knowledge

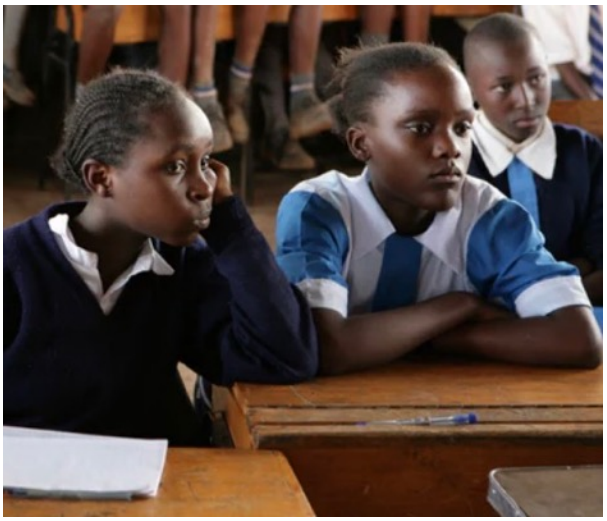
more explicit. Rather than promoting or criticizing a particular cultural norm, this can reduce some of the confusion or stress which students are facing when they adjust to a new cultural setting.



People entering Australia on humanitarian visas are settled in regional areas in Australia (Refugee Council of Australia, 2018), similar to the area I live and work in. English language teachers in government-funded programs can be some of the first faces of a new culture for these students. It is helpful for teachers to be aware of some of the stresses their refugee-background students have faced, and continue to face as they adjust to a new culture. For example, Liddell and Jobson's (2018) research suggests that cultural factors shape how we respond to fear, how we view ourselves, and whether or how we make decisions to seek social support. While not psychologists, teachers who are more aware of students' stresses and cultural backgrounds can show greater sensitivity to students' needs, and understand culturally-appropriate responses more easily.

However, the stress of adjusting to a new culture isn't only felt by students with backgrounds of deep trauma such as refugees. Research into acculturative stress has identified that increased levels of depression, anxiety, and isolation are experienced by international students in Australia as a result of adjusting to study in a new

country. New teaching and learning styles, language, racial discrimination, and practical difficulties have all been named as stressors which impact significantly on students adjusting to study in a new country (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Another study into the rise of mental health issues among international students in Australia found that a contributor to stress was the "*culture* shock…of unfamiliar methods of teaching and learning" (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016, p. 668). For example, for a student familiar with a teacher-directed style of classroom, or an environment where memorization and rote learning are valued, adjusting to an academic environment where they are expected to actively participate in group discussions, develop arguments, and express opinions is a stressful, cultural adjustment to make. Making this adjustment in a second language and "without traditional social markers by which to navigate,…new circumstances" (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016, p. 675) can also intensify the stress experienced.



Finally, by taking time to become aware of the issues which our students might be facing, we, their language teachers, can be part of a supportive network for these students while they adjust to a new culture. We also owe it to our students to be cultural *learners,* not just cultural leaders. When we make an effort to understand how our own and others' cultural backgrounds shape ways of thinking, we become teachers who embrace and model "curiosity…openness, and a willingness to learn alongside the learner" (Newton, 2016, p. 175).

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'Do any of you speak English?'- The language and information barriers faced by refugees and migrants

The number of refugees and Asylum Seekers seeking new homes has skyrocketed and the trend might continue. Our profession holds a unique opportunity to ease the difficulties of this diaspora, and teaching refugees might be the norm in the future.

This moving five-minute video shows the problems Syrian refugees face and their need for language training.